

ARCOLA NATIVE'S WORK IN SERBIA AN INTERNATIONAL INSPIRATION

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Kenneth Baughman [u](#)

WEIERHOF, Germany – As I entered the old church, I imagined Gen. George S. Patton standing on its steps in 1945 and informing the residents of the little German village of Weierhof that he was taking it over.

He was not only taking over the church but the whole town, to be used as a billet for his troops. The church would be used for a feeding center for the community. The Mennonite gymnasium (an advanced high school) would be used as a Third Army headquarters, a position it assumed until the American Army released it in 1959 to the Mennonites.

But this was not any church. This was one of the historical peace churches established some 300 years before when Swiss Anabaptists (today known as Amish or Mennonites) fled their homeland to avoid persecution and death. They located in the farming area of Pfalz ruled by Elector Prince Karl Ludwig who was in need of able farmers for the repopulating of depleted lands after the Thirty Years' War. The Mennonites were known for their industry and the state of their organic farming.

Now, it's 1999 and a special Sunday, Pentecost, a Christian holiday in Rheinland-Pfalz celebrating the coming of the Holy Ghost. The speaker on this

day is Harold Otto of Arcola, Illinois, who has come to discuss his experiences as a Mennonite missionary in Belgrade, Serbia.

Otto was completing his third tour of duty with the Mennonite Central Committee since 1986, after having served as a relief worker in the Congo and Rwanda. Excusing his "Amerikanisch Deutsch" he told of the experience of his friend, Pavle Bozhech, an Apostolic Serb who spent one year in prison for draft resistance.

Otto met Bozhech as a result of Amnesty International's letter-writing campaign to seek his release from prison. The effort was successful and through frequent telephone calls, Bozhech learned that the village where he lived protected him from further conscription by the Serbian police.

Otto has since reported through a Mennonite Central Committee press release that he has been allowed back in Belgrade. He says that although Belgrade may look normal, without a doubt there is a grave humanitarian crisis.

The destruction of the economic infrastructure is startling. There is only one bridge across the Danube River in the whole country. Many factories have been destroyed, and thousands of people have lost their jobs. The MCC has spent \$1.5 million for relief in Yugoslavia over the last three years, much of it raised at Mennonite Relief Sales such as those held in Arthur, Bloomington and Peoria, Illinois.

Harold Otto is a remarkable individual. He gives the appearance of and sounds like the former secretary of labor, Robert Reich. Otto is a gentle man, the descendant of the Amishman Daniel Otto, who came from Spring, Pennsylvania, and founded the Amish settlement in Arthur, Illinois. Harold Otto

is a graduate of Harvard University and the recipient of a local Rotary International fellowship to study in Costa Rica.

When asked why he forsook a professional career in favor of MCC, Otto related how a Jewish classmate introduced him to a book titled "Lest Innocent Blood Be Shed."²

In 1984 Otto visited the subject of the book, the Rev. Edward Theis, in a nursing home south of Leon France. It was the life's satisfaction of the Rev. Theis and his experience of saving hundreds of German Jews through his Protestant church in Vichy, France, from 1940 to 1944, that influenced Otto to go into relief work.

The story of Harold Otto stands in stark contrast to the stories of hate that receive headlines today. We found other untold stories in Germany of good deeds that will never make the headlines. Not far from this very Mennonite church in a wheat field between the villages of Weierhof and Weitersweiler lies an old Jewish cemetery carefully preserved by the residents of the area. In the town of Erlangen, the home of Friedrich Alexander University, an ensemble of German students performed Jewish music from Russia, while those in attendance danced, an event sponsored by the director of cultural affairs of the city of Nuremberg.

Last month, as one of the first acts of the younger folks who now make up the Bundestag in Berlin, an act establishing a Holocaust Memorial was passed. It is indeed reassuring to see how the new generation of Germans has made reconciliation with the past, and the genuine respect they have for what the Americans have done for them since the war.

^[1] *Kenneth Baughman is a Monticello attorney and contributing writer for the Illinois Mennonite Historical Society. Harold Otto's e-mail address is Harold_otto@post.harvard.edu. This article was published in the Champaign News Gazette on August 8, 1999.*

^[2] *Lest Innocent Blood Be Shed By: Philip P. Hallie ISBN: 0060925175 (1978)*

See sermon by the Rev. James E. Grant, Unitarian Universalist Community Church, Santa Monica, California, October 30, 2005,

<http://www.uusm.org/services/103005.php>